

Help NKU catch up

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Gov. Ernie Fletcher last week added his blessing to giving Northern Kentucky University a fairer share of state per-student funding. Earlier this month, Kentucky's higher education coordinating board recommended that NKU's \$46 million base funding be boosted in the next two-year budget cycle by \$11 million.

Now it's up to lawmakers to get with the program and help NKU catch up. NKU may not get the full amount out of the 2006 session that starts in January, but a strong case can be made for it, because it has been the most underfunded of the regional universities, yet keeps making remarkable progress.

Fletcher said as much in giving three persuasive reasons for his support for NKU: (1) Though underfunded compared with Kentucky's other public universities, NKU spends its state appropriation wisely; (2) it's growing faster than most of the others; and (3) it's "very involved with economic development, which is something that I want to see universities be much more involved in," Fletcher said.

NKU is also underfunded compared

with peer universities across the United States. Kentucky's Council on Postsecondary Education uses a complex model to measure the funding gap for its public universities when measured against benchmark universities elsewhere. On that model too, NKU scored the biggest funding gap in the state — 48 percent. The average gap for all universities in the state system was rated only 28.5 percent.

The council recommended larger dollar totals for the state's more complex universities, as should be expected since the 1997 state reform bill (House Bill 1) called for the University of Kentucky to become a Top 20 public research university and the University of Louisville to become a nationally recognized metropolitan university. But NKU's extraordinary enrollment growth has only made its funding gap more acute.

NKU also merits extra funds for taking the lead in regional stewardship programs and collaborating with businesses and local governments for economic competitiveness. Northern Kentucky's rank as the state's second-largest economic engine makes NKU an even smarter state investment.